



FEAR AND CONNECTION IN AN INTERDEPENDENT WORLD

Paul King coaches using embodiment approaches and techniques. He looks below the surface to explore the subconscious patterns that drive and entrap us.

Dig below the surface of most personal and social issues and you will find shared subconscious patterns and narratives that drive and entrap us. Diversity and inclusion are subjects that encapsulate and reveal these patterns, patterns that are often so up-close in our personal and cultural psyche that we do not fully perceive our biases and the milieu we are swimming in.

A core role of the work done in coaching, both for coach and coachee, is precisely to make more of the unseen and the unmet seen and felt. This is work done not only with the mind but also the body. Working with our narratives – and with the neurology and biology that underlie those narratives – we can reshape ourselves and the stories and culture we create.

In organisations and elsewhere, the diversity agenda runs ahead of inclusion. We can, it seems, more easily create a richer mix of representation at the table (albeit slowly) than we can truly include all the voices. Inclusion demands more internal work; work to confront patterns, to confront culture. Diversity and differences are rich in potential if we learn how to open ourselves up to them and engage with them.

THE DIVERSITY PARADOX

The challenges facing diversity and inclusion are writ large in recent discussions: #BLM; the disproportionate suffering of BAME people (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) during Covid-19¹; and in gender inequality, ageism, and neurodiversity, all of which play out in organisations. Can organisations reconcile the tension between focusing on inclusion as a matter of simple moral integrity and the business case to back these decisions as well? One might argue it is functional to adapt oneself (or an organisation) to play according to

the ruling game (e.g. the predominant globalised capitalist system), even when the game itself is dysfunctional. Humans have an expediency bias as a strategy for survival – this makes logical sense. Expediency is a preference for acting quickly and in a way that addresses immediate fear and anxiety, choosing the present over the future. Add to that the other in-built biases in the brain such as the similarity bias – preferring things or people that are like us – and we find diversity and inclusion hitting neural highway roadblocks.

Our nervous system, biased as it is towards threat, drives our compelling need for safety, status and control; our preference for our 'tribe'; our caution with difference; and our tendency to create 'others', which we fear. When fearful, whether from uncertainty or the unfamiliar, we contract in our thinking and from connection with the world around us.

Dr David Rock, the founder of the Neuroleadership Institute, summarised five primary human social needs in his SCARF model²: Status (being valued/respected), Certainty (knowing what is going on), Autonomy (having choices), Relatedness (a sense of belonging), and Fairness (felt not only for self but for other). This model can be used to create inclusion policy and training for managers and executives, but unless these needs are satisfied in those executives they will still be entrapped by anxiety and fear. So, the paradox is that the exercise of diversity and inclusion can trigger our fears and hinder our capacity to connect.

i. This trend has been very pronounced in the UK. For more information, see gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-understanding-the-impact-on-bame-communities

2. your-brain-at-work.com/files/NLJ_SCARFUS.pdf

FROM FEAR TO ENGAGEMENT

How do we move from separating to connecting, and from contracting to opening? How do we move from threat and retreat to approach and engage? What are the possible paths? Here are some suggestions:

- **Know where you are:** This concept is central to mindfulness and the development of self-awareness. F M Alexander, founder of the Alexander technique³, worked with the deep habitual patterns of the body-mind. He emphasised our primary capacity to inhibit – to stop doing what we are doing – before enacting the complementary capacity of direction. That is, we lay answers on top of cultures of habit that distort the original intent. Before we engage in these automatically, we first need to inhibit or pause action. As the poet David Whyte says, the first step in any courageous conversation is to stop having the conversation you are currently having.
- **Name the fear:** It can help to simply name the fear or anxiety. Separating our executive brain function from the emotional energy dissipates the energy and its hold on us (this works with other felt experiences too).
- **Look for connection:** We can shift our perception, for example by extending our sense of 'tribe', challenging separateness, and allowing connection to be felt and compassion to flow.
- **Embody compassion:** Neuroscience shows that, as we develop our capacity for compassion and embody it in action, fear drops away.
- **Centering:** The adaptation of aikido practices and principles for the everyday embodies the capacity to extend connection and compassion towards threat and stressors. Doing this within the process of centering, we access a different neurology – a different reality – resourcing ourselves to be with what is in the present and with presence, while simultaneously freeing ourselves from habitual reactive patterns. The body leads the way, shape-shifting, learning to extend and include the threat or trigger rather than contract, shrink away and separate. In Wendy Palmer's Leadership Embodiment, for example, we learn how to centre and align our head, heart and gut to create an embodied experience, to speak up with clarity and without aggression, and to listen without taking things personally.

We have always faced the challenge of navigating our way through life in this uncertain and turbulent world. The global eco-social system has been offering up its feedback for a good while. Moving forward with the pandemic, diversity and inclusion at all levels, and climate change, the ante has been upped. This could be scary, but it is also an opportunity to change our relationships with ourselves, others and our planet. Inside-outside, outside-inside: there is work to be done. I for one have more work to do.

3. 'A process that shines a light on inefficient habits of movement and patterns of accumulated tension, which interferes with our innate ability to move easily'. alexandertechnique.com

FOUR PATHWAYS FOR LETTING GO OF FEAR: A CONVERSATION WITH DAVE RICHO

In a conversation in January with David Richo – a Jungian psychotherapist, teacher and author whose workshops we have hosted over many years – he and I explored the key themes in his work. We mapped out four arenas of practice that can help us move from fear of others to engagement with them.

1. Radical acceptance of ourselves, others and reality as it is
We cultivate an 'unconditional yes' to the unavoidable 'givens' of human life and we learn to embrace our predicaments without trying to control the outcomes. We trust the givens as gifts that help us grow in character, depth and compassion. The five unavoidable givens of everyday life are:

- Everything changes and ends
- Things do not always go according to plan
- Life is not always fair
- Pain is part of life
- People are not loving and loyal all the time

When we offer an unconditional 'yes', our predicament, whatever its shape or however ominous, becomes a path.

2. Letting go of fears that interfere with our happiness

When fearful, often we are being bullied by our own unfinished business. Looking at what provokes us, we find opportunities to develop resources to stay calm and find lasting resolution.

3. Dealing with 'the dark side'

We contain creative qualities and powers that we keep hidden out of fear and self-doubt, our dark sides. Our shadow includes all that we find repugnant in ourselves and all the wonderful attributes that we have discarded or denied. We project our negativities onto others as strong dislike and our positive potential onto others as awe and admiration. What is the healthy response to malice and injustice? There are liberating, as well as creative, ways to confront these aspects of individuals and society.

4. Looking to the compass of trust and finding grace

Trust toward ourselves, others, a higher power or purpose, and reality itself. We can learn to trust our inner resources. We can become more adept at knowing who to trust. We can build trust when it is broken. In all this we find grace, the power to act virtuously. We can then trust that whatever happens shows us a map of our best future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Paul King is co-founder, with Marie Faire, of The Beyond Partnership. Paul has been working with integral, holistic, and embodied approaches, connecting personal development to larger system change, for more than 30 years. He has delivered embodiment-based workshops and coaching across Europe and in North America and Asia, he is now transferring some of this work online. His experience includes Inner Game coaching, Leadership Embodiment, Feldenkrais (Movement Re Education), Tai Chi, Qigong, Polarity Therapy, NLP trainer training and Spiral Dynamics.